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## Unfinished Business: Sholem Aleichem's *From the Fair*

LOOKING AT SHOLEM ALEICHEM'S unfinished autobiography *Funem yarid* (*From the Fair*) might help us resolve some of the longstanding debates as to the author's major strengths and weaknesses. Since 1908, for example, critics have been divided as to whether Sholem Aleichem's real subject was the life of the Jewish collective which he captured through national types (Ba'al-Makhshoves) or the life of the individual Jew caught in a web of madness (Nokhem Oyslender). Later, as critical methodologies hardened along party lines, a debate arose over Tevye and Menakhem-Mendl as paradigms of the petty bourgeoisie (Max Erik) or of the Jewish collective unconscious (I. J. Trunk). It would seem that the existence of an autobiography might settle the matter one way or the other, for autobiography is the one genre designed to probe the inner life of the writer, the voyage of his soul, or, at the very least, the course of his education.<sup>1</sup> Can it be that the critics who argued the collectivist position then ignored *From the Fair* in order to skew the evidence in their favor?

Or take the image of childhood in Sholem Aleichem's fiction. Sholem Aleichem was sometimes capable of viewing the child's pain and terror imaginatively, from its own ground, not from a fixed, adult perspective that became part of some larger, happier story.<sup>2</sup> Why, then, is so much of the trauma mitigated in its autobiographical retelling? Is it that he was growing soft in the face of his own mortality or, as the Marxists would have it, succumbing to nationalist fantasies in response to rising capitalism and political repression?

Finally, there is the matter of the Sholem Aleichem persona itself. It was this mysterious and comic "presence," formed in his early years as a

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writer of satiric feuilletons, that shaped his most brilliant works, and not the omniscient narrator of his "serious" novels on contemporary themes.<sup>3</sup> Why, then, was the work which he touted as his Song of Songs written along novelistic lines, with so little free scope given to the comic voice of its narrator?

If, after taking a good look at *From the Fair*, we are no closer to resolving these issues, it may be because the work does not ultimately satisfy, that it does not reveal a truth deeper than fiction, or provide a psychologically motivated portrait of childhood, or make for a particularly gripping novel. Were we, in fact, to rank Sholem Nokhem-Veviks from among Sholem Aleichem's major fictional characters, he would have to come in fourth. The hero of *From the Fair* lacks the engaging madness of Menakhem-Mendl, Tevye's fortitude or Motl's vitality, though he alone will grow up to become a celebrated writer of genius.<sup>4</sup> So perhaps *From the Fair* enjoys a particular hold on the reader's imagination precisely for what it lacks: it reveals so little of that genius, though we expect to learn so much, and though unfinished, it alone among Sholem Aleichem's major works holds out the promise of a happy end.

Sholem Aleichem was motivated to embark upon this semi-autobiographical venture by the fear of imminent death, first in 1908, and again in 1913. The final revisions as well as the last twenty-seven chapters were written from 1915–1916.<sup>5</sup> As always, interruptions and the passage of time deepened his sense of the work and strengthened his control over it. In 1913 the long-range plan was to write an historical overview of Yiddish literary development;<sup>6</sup> but it would have been a spotty history at best, since *From the Fair* contains not a single date and offers only the most meager information on the hero's earliest literary endeavors.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps a more accurate description was the one he gave in 1895, thirteen years before he actually began writing. The original plan had been to describe the highpoints of the author's childhood and youth, "episodes . . . which would be of special interest not only to myself, but also to others."<sup>8</sup> What the revisions of *From the Fair* show, in fact, is the consistent omission of biographical data and an increasing use of novelistic devices.

Here, as elsewhere, Sholem Aleichem had an established literary tradition to fall back upon. Of many possible Hebrew, Yiddish and Russian models, the most influential was clearly Abramovitsh's fictional memoir *Shloyne reb Khayims* (translated as *Of Bygone Days*), the first eleven chapters of which appeared in 1899. From this work, Sholem Aleichem learned the need for separating the writer from his literary persona, and that by depicting the social and physical environment he could

achieve several goals, not least of which was the shaping of the hero's consciousness.

In the brilliant preface to *Shloyme reb Khayims*, Abramovitsh has a cynical and exasperated Mendele the Bookpeddler engage the prominent intellectual Reb Shloyme in a discussion of literature. The latter responds by defining thought, speech, and writing as purely rational activities. Thought, Reb Shloyme argues, originates in the intellect and serves to clarify the intellectual process. But a few pages later, following an unexpected visit by a destitute yeshiva student from Lithuania, Reb Shloyme admits that indeed, there is an emotional and psychological dimension to thought. Artistic inspiration, moreover, may derive from the suspension of rational activity. "Even my first conscious realization of my self began with a storm," he is forced to admit.<sup>9</sup> The story that follows, therefore, is not merely an ethnographic or historical account of a bygone era, but also proof of this thesis. The narrative will show which forces activated the creative powers within the child-artist.

Seen in this light, *Shloyme reb Khayims* is essentially a critique of shtetl society, for the forces that distort the hero's imagination and artistic perception are rooted in the traditional establishment (the rumor mongering and obscurantism of communal gatherings; the oppressive burden of ritual), while the positive, shaping forces are to be found in nature and on the margins of respectable society. Though the implied critique is altogether missing from Sholem Aleichem's work, the hero's development is charted in remarkably similar ways.

Like Abramovitsh and earlier writers, Sholem Aleichem justified the ethnographic detail of his novel as an act of preservation for future generations.<sup>10</sup> An added impetus, perhaps, for the ethnographic approach, were Yekhezkl Kotik's memoirs which Sholem Aleichem read and acclaimed just before he began the second installment of *From the Fair*.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the title and central conceit of the novel, that of a worldly-wise narrator looking back upon the great bustling fair of his life, was borrowed from Linetski's otherwise undistinguished autobiographical diatribe.<sup>12</sup>

In Sholem Aleichem's introductory chapter, there is no caustic Mendele around to deflate the author's pretensions. Sholem Aleichem's nostalgic mood will not allow the logical contradictions of his argument to be exposed. For on the one hand he rejects a "confessional" approach as inevitably lapsing into subjectivity and self-justification. He prefers a novelistic approach, albeit one rooted in biography, as a more "objective" form of writing, especially since it will be "Sholem Aleichem the writer" narrating "the true life-history of Sholem Aleichem the person." As it turned out, this tactical retreat into supposed objectivity was a high price to pay.

Were *From the Fair* written in monologue form, as Sadan would have us believe (see his "Three Foundations" reprinted above), then the story of "Sholem Aleichem the person" would indeed be narrated by "Sholem Aleichem the writer"—who comes across in his voluminous correspondence as a man of great wit, theatricality and mercurial moods. Or better yet, the voice of one persona would reverberate against the other. Instead, "Sholem Aleichem the writer" saddled himself with the burden of omniscience, a task he was never very good at. Were this only a love story, like his autobiographical novella *Shir hashirim* ("Song of Songs"), he could have sustained the same lyrical voice throughout. Were this yet another portrait-of-an-artist-novel, like *Stempenyu*, he could have alternated between the dramatic and lyrical modes. But here was his own, "official" biography which—playing by his self-imposed rules—did not allow for disparate voices.

Writing one's autobiography was something that an established writer was expected to do, and Sholem Aleichem was eager to please. To do so, he needed to separate his public and private personae, but he was unwilling either to expose the contradictions between them or to allow one of them to exist on its own. And so what we are left with is a fictional character described by an ethereal narrator—neither serious nor comic, half *Bildung*, half *Roman*.

While some readers were taken in by the claim for objectivity and factuality,<sup>13</sup> we would be better advised to read *From the Fair* (and all autobiographies, for that matter) as a work of fiction. The plot, as we shall see, is governed by conventions borrowed from the *Bildungsroman* and from Sholem Aleichem's other novels: there is a linear progression of moves from one setting to another, while the hero's life follows the cyclical, rise-and-fall pattern so characteristic of Sholem Aleichem's work as a whole.

Voronko, the first setting of the novel, is the least realistic. It is described not as an actual, impoverished Jewish market town in the backwoods of the Ukraine, but as the model for Kasrilevke, Sholem Aleichem's fictional construct. And indeed, many of the same sights figure in both the Voronko panorama and the opening chapter of the Kasrilevke series.<sup>14</sup> Both towns can boast of the same tottering bath-house, awesome house of study, majestic hill and ancient cemetery. Both towns have thus far been spared the incursions of the railroad. Notably absent in both Voronko and Kasrilevke, as Dan Miron pointed out, is the Greek Orthodox church, for both towns are to be seen as Jewish mini-empires, devoid of goyim.<sup>15</sup>

Just as the Kasrilevker can withstand the winds of change and the plight of poverty through verbal repartee and communal self-deception,

so the childhood vision of Voronko remains intact despite the obvious discrepancy between rhetoric and reality:<sup>16</sup>

Which large city—Odessa, Paris, London or even New York—can boast of such a large market with so many Jewish shops, stands and stalls with mountainsful of fresh aromatic apples and pears, cantaloupes and water-melons? Goats and pigs (constantly shooed away by the market women) loved to nuzzle these fruits, and the schoolboys too liked all these goodies but couldn't get near them. (Y 15:20; E 5)

This is the same European narrator of the Kasrilevke stories, especially of the new series, whose acquaintance with the world and its vocabulary creates an emotional distance between himself and the insulated shtetl. Though the adult narrator can see things in their true proportion, he has no desire to explode the hero's point of view. Already at the outset, therefore, all experiences are filtered through a sagacious, whimsical narrator. For all its energy, the narrative flow makes minimal demands.

Pain in this story will be conjured away by the combined efforts of the narrator and his hero, and a good example of this mitigated pain comes right at the beginning, with the treatment of poverty. Nothing could be more characteristic of Jewish life in eastern Europe and of the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* than the problem of money.<sup>17</sup> In Voronko, as in Kasrilevke, the desire for money is transformed into the myth of the hidden treasure. Throughout his later life, thoughts of the treasure almost invariably save Sholem from despair.<sup>18</sup>

Sholem is actually something of a Kásrilik himself. Before taking leave of the town forever, the recollection of the treasure calls forth sentiments that closely echo the well-known monologue *Ven ikh bin Roytshild* ("If I Were Rothschild"). Sholem lists all the poor and indigent townspeople whom he would help with his new-found wealth:

Moshe the Slaughterer's wife, the poor widow, would get such a large sum she'd no longer talk of getting married again. That would spare her the long journey to Chvastev to her poor relatives who could hardly make ends meet. And though they didn't deserve it, the two pious ladies, Frume the Maid and Feigeleh the Witch, would also get a large share, beyond their husbands' wildest dreams. And old Ruda Basye, who baked bagels, dumplings and cakes, and supported her family with her swollen hands, would be able to retire in her old age. And Melech the Shamesh and Gedalya the Drunkard—why should they be left out? (Y 15:130–31; E 61)

As soon as these noble sentiments are put to the test, however, Sholem reveals his insensitivity to those in need. Gergele the Thief comes to say goodbye and the hero unwittingly humiliates him through misguided philanthropy. Sholem's punishment is quick to come. On arriving in Pereyaslev, he is shocked by the fallen state of his parents and by the

absence of all the old symbols of luxury. The second disappointment will come in Bohuslav when he discovers that even his grandparents have not the slightest claim to wealth.

Each of the hero's first three moves occasions a memorable character sketch of the respective coachman: Leyzer Hirsh the storyteller, Shimen Wolf the silent and Reb Noyekh the procrastinator. Sholem Aleichem exploited this fully only in the last revision, since originally, only Shimen Wolf's character was fully developed and Reb Noyekh did not appear at all. Similarly, only in the final version do the moves to and from Pereyaslev each involve an episode in which the hero responds to the stimuli of nature with philosophical and aesthetic observations (chaps. 24 and 36–37).

The central drama of the second, Pereyaslev unit is anticipated from the start when the hero goes visiting his relatives and finds two radically different households. The freedom and ostentatious wealth of Aunt Hannah's home is contrasted to the strict piety of Uncle Pinny's and whereas in the first, it is Sholem's biblical expertise that wins the day, his more traditional skill in calligraphy is what most impresses Uncle Pinny. Both paths can be pursued within a totally Jewish framework, though one smacks of enlightenment and the other is bound up with the past.<sup>19</sup> At this early stage, during his first sojourn in Pereyaslev, Sholem is still limited to the Jewish part of town. We learn in some detail of traditional heder education and of Sholem's various teachers. It is only fitting, then, that Book One should end with Pinny's victory—his nephew's bar mitzva, the crowning achievement of Sholem's learning. But even at this point the hero reads into his uncle's eye an expression of doubt as to his *real* piety.

Uncle Pinny inspected Sholom from head to toe and smiled into his beard, as if to say: "Well, that little rascal certainly knows a thing or two. That's perfectly evident. But does he pray every day? Does he wash his hands upon awakening? Does he say the bedtime Shema? Does he refrain from carrying on the Sabbath? I have my doubts." (Y 15:184; E 90)

New desires are quick to seduce our impressionable hero: love, shiny boots and music. But his mother's untimely death cuts this development short and Sholem is thrust back into the world of his earliest childhood. Bohuslav, the third setting, is the quintessential shtetl, a place teeming with Jews and with "Jewish" sounds:

Jews with hides, Jews with hats, Jews with cloth; they offered rolls, egg bagels, cookies, apple cider. Jews sold everything under the sun. And women too! Women with baskets, women with apples, women with chickens, women with fried fish, and just plain women. And squeals and screams and rattles galore. Horses, cows and pigs added to the din. And beggars sang and played lyres—the noise was deafening. (Y 15:227–28; E 114)



The oppressive intimacy of the shtetl is immediately felt in the cross-examination which the orphaned children are subjected to. The shtetl knows everything, not only about Moyshe Yossi Hamarnik, but also—one must assume—about the other three Moyshe Yossis as well. Bohuslav is a medieval town with medieval notions. The building of a new stable can give rise to a heated discussion. Grandfather's "business" is conducted in the most primitive way imaginable and he himself is usually engaged in prayer and mystical meditation. It is this very self-contained isolation that enables the Jews of Bohuslav to preserve the sanctity of Jewish ritual and observance. Sholem responds willingly to the fervor and spontaneity of hasidic prayer and even contrasts the "Jewish town of Bohuslav" to "half-goyish Pereyaslev" (Y 15:257; E 131).

The forces that threatened to seduce the young hero when he first arrived in Pereyaslev assume more ominous proportions on his return. This is because he now finds himself to be a stranger in his own home and for the first time in his life he must confront economic hardship. He sees his father falling victim to false hopes as the latter is drawn into the lottery game. Even more demoralizing is the trade in human merchandise which is conducted in the name of tradition:

After all, how could a goy appreciate the pleasure of leading a son-in-law to shul on the Sabbath, all decked out in new clothes from top to toe, putting him on exhibit in a seat way up front by the eastern wall, giving him Maftir, and then hearing him sing out a Haftorah from the bimah the likes of which hadn't been heard before, while the women push one another at the window of the women's gallery to get a better look at him? "Where is he? Where?" No, a goy would never understand this even if he were the wisest man in the world. (Y 16:29; E 148)

Both Uncle Pinny and Aunt Hannah are guilty of this Jewish hubris and therefore begin to be discredited in the eyes of the hero. Pinny especially has now become the embodiment of religious dogma, the foil to his enlightened brother Reb Nokhem. Amidst this hypocrisy and these false values there emerges the figure of Arnold from Pidvorki, a typical maskilic hero.

Arnold is quite literally a marginal figure, living as he does not in the mercantile city but in the healthy village suburb, close to the earth. No pretensions here; people speak their minds, even if the city folk find their speech somewhat vulgar. Arnold is an outspoken critic of hypocrisy and of Hasidism, but as a successful Russian journalist, he is feared by Jews and Gentiles alike.

. . . Even Uncle Pinny thought highly of Arnold because of his honesty. His integrity was famous in town. Honesty was an obsession with him. Arnold feared no one; he yone straight in the eye and told the unadorned

truth. And above all, he derided the rich and didn't give a damn about money. Now tell me, how can you not be fond of a man like that?

(Y 16:38; E 153)

Arnold, then, is the repudiation of all the false values that the Jews of Pereyaslev live by. Sholem, who greatly respects his qualities, has one more crucial thing to learn from him—the value of secular education. On Arnold's recommendation, Sholem is sent to a Russian preparatory school. This is the crucial turning point in his life in which the scales of allegiance fall decisively on the side of worldly values. Pereyaslev now becomes the arena for radically new experiences. The hero's exemplary Jewish education is now counteracted by the effects of Russian and worldly influences (chaps. 47–50). Both prepare him for the crucial test that is to come in Sofievke, the rural paradise where the hero enjoys a temporary respite from all the pains and pressures of life in the Jewish community (chaps. 68–73).

Just as he won the hearts of his relatives in Pereyaslev, Sholem now wins acceptance into the bosom of the Loyev family. His superb calligraphy and complete mastery of the Hebrew Bible are the skills that most impress old Loyev, the landowner-maskil, but it is the hero's encyclopedic knowledge of Russian literature and Enlightenment thought that endears him to Loyev's daughter, Sholem's future wife.

The return to nature has a beneficial effect upon Sholem and for the first time, his life is devoid of all tension. Sofievke is a period of unrelieved bliss and effusive idealization. The nervous tempo of *From the Fair* is suspended for a few short chapters until a new crisis is precipitated and the hero is banished from Eden.<sup>20</sup>

In Kiev the hero comes full circle. Despite his familiarity with Russian culture, he is treated just like every other Jew living in the (provincial) capital without a permit. Despite the great distance he has traveled in his life, he proves nonetheless to be a true son of Kasrilevke—the first con-man who comes along runs off with all his money.

Here, Sholem comes of age, and in this he follows the pattern established in the European *Bildungsroman*. Like his French and English counterparts, Sholem is

"the young man from the provinces" who completes his initiation, for better or for worse, in the city to which he travels. The values of his childhood are frequently challenged, yet sometimes prove sustaining and the first sensitive impressions remain traumatically vivid; for the child, as in Wordsworth, is indeed the father of the man. Yet it is part of the youth's ordeal to suffer "alienation," to experience the loss of home and father and the correlatives of innocence and faith, and to seek self-realization in a new and often unaccommodating environment.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that Sholem Rabinovitsh was *in reality* a young man from the provinces who made his name amidst the mad bustle of Kiev, does not



prove the factuality of *From the Fair*. It does explain, however, why the *Bildungsroman* was the fictional form Sholem Aleichem chose to emulate. And if the course of the hero's education strikes the modern reader as being too formal, or external, it is because of the image of childhood that the writer wished to project upon his own idealized self-portrait.

The hero's latent artistic nature is quick to find expressive forms. The very first impression of the hero is of a fiery, spontaneous spirit which all the beatings of his mother, maid and teacher cannot diminish. Standing though he does at the very center of a large and vibrant family (he is the middle child), Sholem is drawn nonetheless to someone quite the opposite—to Shmulik the orphan. Shmulik is the first to channel Sholem's raw talent in creative directions. Shmulik's values prove sustaining throughout the hero's life and his initiation into the realms of the imagination shape Sholem's future artistic career.

Sholem Aleichem rewrote the Shmulik episode numerous times changing: (1) Shmulik's characterization, (2) the source of his tales, and (3) their content. Just as the description of Shmulik becomes more idealized from version to version,<sup>22</sup> so does the source of his knowledge become more and more wondrous. In the first draft, Shmulik makes up his stories as he goes along and then forgets to finish them.<sup>23</sup> In the intermediate versions, Shmulik is depicted as a master storyteller, though his tales have no beginning and no climax. In one draft, the probable source of his repertoire is also given: like every Jewish child, he listened to the stories his grandparents told on Saturday evenings.<sup>24</sup> In the final version, the matter is left mysteriously open:

How did this extraordinary youngster with the red cheeks and dreamy eyes know so many stories? Such rich, beautiful ones with so many extraordinary images? Had he heard someone telling these tales? Or were these absolute fantasies drawn straight from his imagination? To this very day I do not know. (Y 15:29; E 9)

The major change is in the scope and content of his repertoire. Originally, Shmulik specialized in demonology and love stories. In the second version, these become the property of Feygele the Witch who inaugurates the hero's sexual education (chap. 14), while the treasure motif takes up all of one paragraph. By the final version, Shmulik's repertoire has expanded to include three main categories: stories of a distant literary origin (chap. 4), historical legends embellished by magic and Kabbala (chap. 5), and the basic myths and legends of Judaism—death and the afterlife, the Jewish Hall of Fame (chap. 6). Thus, Shmulik introduces his friend to the literary, historical and religious imagination (in the Bohuslav unit, Moyshe Yossi takes over Shmulik's role). One may conclude that the significance of the Shmulik episode continued to

grow together with Sholem Aleichem's plan for the work as a whole. Shmulik's treasure is the hero's sustaining value and his stories are Sholem's first adventure in flights of the imagination.

Similarly, the Shmulik episode anticipates the two central patterns in the hero's life: abandonment and deviance. The experience of personal loss is a recurring pattern in *From the Fair*. Each major crisis in Sholem's life occurs when he is abandoned by his loved ones: the sudden departure of Shmulik (chap. 7) and Meir Medvedevker (chap. 9); the sudden death of his friend Sirko the dog (chap. 11), of his beloved teacher (chap. 21) and of his mother (chap. 34); the betrayal by his first love (chap. 57) and the forced exile from his true love (chap. 73). Secondly, something in his artistic nature attracts him to marginal or antisocial types—Shmulik the orphan, Gergele the Thief, Berl the Widow's son and the numerous musicians and cantors he meets throughout his life. His friendship for Sirko and Meirl (nicknamed The Goy) is likewise found to be reprehensible. But Sholem needs each of these friends to develop new artistic and human dimensions. Meir introduces him to folksong and theater. Sirko, man's best friend, teaches the future writer compassion for and insight into animal behavior. Even the delinquent types have something important to teach him: a critical view of society. Gergele, for instance, is a first-rate comedian and mimic, just like Sholem himself. A lower class kid out on his own, Gergele is labeled a thief by the shtetl and becomes one out of spite. Since society rejected him, he retaliates in kind:

He found fault with everyone and gave everyone a nickname. Since he himself was free as the wind and had nothing to lose, he loved to stick out his bare foot like a poker and make everyone trip and fall flat on his face. It made no difference to him if it was the rabbi himself, the rebbitsin or the slaughterer's wife—plop, and down you went. (Y 15:119; E 55)

The true child-artist learns to see reality in all its minute faults and contradictions and learns to transcend reality through the elemental force of music and the imagination.<sup>25</sup> To develop these skills, Sholem must search out the exceptional people in his community (Shmulik, Meir, Gergele, Shiye Heshl the Musician) or in his family (Uncle Pinny the dancer and Uncle Nissel the singer).

It is typical of Sholem Aleichem's technique in *From the Fair* that distant relatives and friends make a much stronger claim on the hero's allegiance than do his own brothers and sisters. Though the author's brother Aba was a talented artist and his sister Brokhe a gifted folksinger, similar talents are attributed to eccentric uncles and to unusual friends. The hero is left isolated within the nuclear family in order to face stimuli selectively and telescopically.<sup>26</sup>

Sholem's own pattern of deviance is also tied to his artistic growth. He begins with minor infractions typical of childhood, but ultimately his

freedom of artistic expression can come only through a radical break with traditional society. In part one, the mischievous child is quick to violate the stern moral dictums he learns from his grandmother (chaps. 12–13), but soon thereafter is filled with remorse and contrition (chap. 14). In part two, however, the success of his first literary endeavors (chaps. 45, 47) creates a momentum which climaxes when the hero is caught practicing his art—on the Sabbath (chap. 52). This time, the hero not only weathers the storm unscathed, but is actually “acclaimed” as an artist by his (Russian) teacher, and this, in turn, creates a new thirst for artistic expression (chap. 53) and for deviance (chap. 54). Abandonment and loss are what characterize the struggle of the child-artist *qua* child. Deviance and a willful break from traditional society are what characterize his struggle *qua* artist.

The theme of loss lies at the center not only of Sholem's biography, but of the overall structure of the book as well. The main structural principle of *From the Fair* has been described as a pattern of fall and rebirth which holds for most of Sholem Aleichem's major works. We may accept Miron's designation of three completed rise-and-fall cycles, which, if spelled out, would correspond to chapters 1–25, 26–46, and 47–57. The first cycle includes the move to Pereyaslev and ends with the realization of the rich man's son that he is now the son of a poor innkeeper. The second involves his mother's death, the exile to Bohuslav and concludes with the appearance of the stepmother. The beloved son now finds himself to be a stranger in his own home. Cycle three ends with the hero's tragic love affair and his symbolic death.<sup>27</sup> As he rewrote *From the Fair* over an eight-year period, Sholem Aleichem ever more exploited the dramatic potential of this rise-and-fall pattern.<sup>28</sup>

As heroes of *Bildungsromane* go, this one achieves very little self-knowledge in the course of the novel. Unlike his precursor Shloyme reb Khayims who deliberated in his actions and was aware of his thoughts, Sholem is usually the victim of circumstance or, at best, acts on impulse. It is no accident that Sholem reminds us so often of Motl the Cantor's son or that chapter fifty-four, “Thou Shalt Not Steal,” is so similar to the plot of *Dos meserl* (“The Penknife”). Sholem, like some of the other child heroes in Sholem Aleichem's work, lives in a world of innocence challenged here and there by the vicissitudes of life. The crises are usually precipitated by external forces and all the hero has to do is fall back on his faith in the treasure or on the spiritual succor offered by music.

If we take this at face value, we must conclude that Sholem Aleichem was a mimic artist who began his career by impersonating others, went on to imitate maskilic novels, picked up a little Russian along the way and suddenly burst forth as a native folk talent. Perhaps this is what Sholem Aleichem would have us believe. If, however, we heed his initial

warning, that the writer and the man are not one and the same, and if we consider that both have conspired to reveal nothing but the "high-points," then many of our initial demands will seem unfair. For the Jewish artist, whether he be named Stempennyu, Yosele Nightingale or Sholem Aleichem, is a sentimental hero prone to intense emotion but capable of limited growth (because already endowed with innate talents). As the one named Sholem Aleichem, however, he is also an archetype, and as such obeys the rise-and-fall pattern reserved for all characters of his ilk. Finally, he is Everyman whose quest for the hidden treasure has nothing whatsoever to do with his artistic calling.

Yet, despite these manifold blessings, Sholem Nokhem-Veviks is less real to us than Tevye, or Menakhem-Mendl, or Motl, or than many of the passengers who ride the Straggler Special, and this is because he lacks a voice of his own. What that voice might have revealed about the self-invention of a Jewish folk impresario, or about the inner life of a writer who wanted to be all things to all people, or about his fear of never making it back from the fair—these are all questions that Sholem Aleichem would have us work out for ourselves.

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## NOTES

1. See William C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven & London, 1980), esp. pp. 120–24 and Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Turning Key: Autobiography and the Subjective Impulse since 1800* (Cambridge, Mass. & London, 1984), chap. 3.

2. In *Dos meserl* ("The Penknife"), for instance, now available in a critical edition edited by Khoné Shmeruk (Jerusalem-Cincinnati, 1983). For a brief discussion of the two sides of childhood in Sholem Aleichem's stories, see Dan Miron, "Bouncing Back: Destruction and Recovery in Sholem-Aleykhem's *Motl Peyse dem khazns*," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 17 (1978): 125–26, 142–45.

3. See Dan Miron, *Sholem Aleykhem: Person, Persona, Presence* (New York, 1972).

4. It is to the artist-heroes in Sholem Aleichem's novels that he bears the greatest affinity. See Anita Norich, "Portraits of the Artist in Three Novels by Sholem Aleichem," *Prooftexts* 4 (1984): 243–44.

5. B. Slutsky and Y. Epshteyn have provided an exhausting but not exhaustive text history of *Funem yarid*. See "On the Variants of SA's *Funem yarid*" [Yiddish], *Sholem-Aleykhem: Zamlung fun kritishe artiklen* (Kiev, 1940), pp. 134–64; "The Second Variant of SA's *Funem yarid*" [Yiddish], *Sovyetisher Literarisher almanakh* 12 (1941): 360–93.

Originally called *Sholem Aleichem's Biography, Written by Himself*, only some six or seven chapters were completed in 1908 before the author learned that the New York Jubilee Committee had no intention of publishing it. The manuscript was put aside until 1913 when a wealthy patron from Baku named Shmuel Shrira offered to sponsor the new work. The manuscript, alternately renamed *A Life History Written By Sholem Aleichem* and *Trit*

*bay trit* [Step by Step], soon came to the equivalent of the first fifty-one chapters in the final version. To be exact, the Shrirra MS as described by Slutsky and Epshteyn, contained thirty chapters, corresponding to the final version, chaps. 1-4, 8-9, 13-15, 17-19, 21, 25-26, 29, 31, 34-41, 44-51.

As work was in progress, Y. D. Berkovitch, the author's son-in-law, translated most of the manuscript into Hebrew and it appeared in *Hatsefirah*, the first part as *Yetomim* [Orphans], published in 1913, nos. 252, 258, 261, 267, 270, 276, 280, 286, 288, 291, 294, 296; the second part as *Sefer hayaldut* [The Book of Childhood], published in 1914, nos. 33, 38, 39, 45, 57, 63, 66, 71, 95, 99, 100, 107, 117, 125, 135, 141. All-in-all, this version contains twenty-seven chapters corresponding to the final version, chaps. 3-4, 8, 10-11, 13-15, 17-19, 21, 25-26, 29, 31, 34-46. Berkovitch probably translated these chapters in the summer of 1913 as he helped SA edit his early works. See Y. D. Berkovitch, *Undzere rishoyanim* [Our Pioneers], 5 vols. (Tel Aviv, 1966), 3:196-97; 5:80.

The two other known variants of *Funem yarid* are (A) Handwritten MS in Beyt Sholem Aleykhem, Tel Aviv, which contains nineteen chapters corresponding to the final version, chaps. 10-11, 34-46, 48-51, 54; (B) handwritten and typed MS in the YIVO Institute, New York, which contains the final draft of chaps. 20, 26, 27, 31, 54. Chapters 26 and 31 show the author's revisions. The basic difference between the *Hatsefirah* version and the Shrirra and handwritten MSS is the use of the first person and the omission of most place names. Berkovitch presumably introduced these changes with SA's consent.

6. Letter to Shmuel Shrirra, April 30, 1913, in *Tsum ondenk fun Sholem-Aleykhem* [SA In Memoriam], ed. by Sh. Niger and Y. Tsinberg (Petrograd, 1918), p. 108.

7. For some of the missing information, see the two brief autobiographical sketches written in 1903 and 1908. The first, written at the request of Y. Kh. Ravnitsky, appears at the end of *Funem yarid* in the Folksfond Edition of SA's *Complete Works* (New York, 1925), 16:273-81. The second, translated from the Russian, appears in *Dos Sholem-Aleykhem-bukh*, ed. by Y. D. Berkovitch (New York, 1926), pp. 3-6. See also Ezra Lahad, "Sholem-Aleykhem's First Biobibliography," *Jewish Language Review* 1 (1981): 119-21.

8. Letter to Mordkhe Spektor, 1895, as quoted in "Some Background to the Book *Funem yarid*" [Yiddish], *Dos Sholem-Aleykhem-bukh*, p. 8.

9. The preface originally appeared separately in Hebrew in *Pardes* 2 (1894): 173-88. For an English translation, see "Of Bygone Days" by Mendele Mocher Sforim in *A Shtetl and Other Yiddish Novellas*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse (New York, 1973), pp. 261, 266, 268.

10. See, for instance, the introductions to *Mahaze mul mahaze* [Point and Counterpoint] by Ayzik-Meyer Dik (Warsaw, 1861) and to *Der yidisher far-peysek* (The Jewish Spring) by Mordkhe-Arn Shatskes (Warsaw, 1881), p. 3. See also, Dan Miron, "Folklore and Anti-folklore in the Yiddish Fiction of the *Haskala*," in *Studies in Jewish Folklore*, ed. Frank Talmage (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), pp. 219-49.

11. Two effusive letters to Kotik of 10, 11 January 1913 appear in his *Mayne zikhroynes* [My Memoirs] (Berlin, 1922), 1:9-12. Perhaps the addition of the holiday scenes in Bohuslav (chaps. 42-43) written in 1913 and the expansion of the heder scenes (chaps. 27-30) in 1915 were at least partially attributable to Kotik's example.

12. Yitskhok Yoel Linetski, *Finem yarid, a fantazye tsu mayn zibetsik-yorikn geburtstog* [From the Fair: A Fantasy in Honor of My Seventieth Birthday] (Odessa, 1909).

13. See Ber Borochov's review of *From the Fair* in his *Shprakh-forshung un literatur-geshikhte* [Studies in Linguistics and Literary History], ed. Nakhmen Mayzl (Tel Aviv, 1966), pp. 244-47, and Berkovitch, *Dos Sholem-Aleykhem-bukh*, p. 10.

14. See *Di shtot fun di kleyne mentshelekh* ("The Town of the Little People") written in 1901 and later revised.

15. Dan Miron, "Some Thoughts on the Classic Image of the Shtetl in Yiddish Fiction" [Yiddish] in *Der imazh fun shtetl: dray literarishe shtudyen* [The Shtetl Image: Three Literary Studies] (Tel Aviv, 1981), pp. 21-26.

16. In the citations that follow, "Y" designates the Yiddish original in the Folksfond

Edition (New York, 1925) and "E" refers to Curt Leviant's new English translation (New York: Viking, 1985).

17. Jerome H. Buckley, "Autobiography in the English *Bildungsroman*," *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice*, ed. Morton W. Bloomfield (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), p. 96.

18. Dan Miron, *Shalom Aleykhem: Pirkey masa* [SA: A Critical Essay] (Ramat-Gan, 1970), pp. 172–74. The hero is reminded of Shmulik's treasure in chaps. 23, 25, 33, 35, 40, 46, 47, 51, 65 and 68.

19. Leviant's translation of *bal-tanakh* as "Bible expert" does not convey to the English reader that the study of the *entire* Bible, and not just the Pentateuch, was considered vaguely heretical in eastern Europe. A boy was expected to graduate from the study of the Pentateuch-with-Rashi directly to the Talmud, and not waste his time with "frivolous" matter.

20. "The Banishment from Eden" was Sholem Aleichem's original title for the chapter. See *Dos Sholem-Aleykhem-bukh*, p. 13.

21. Buckley, p. 95.

22. Slutsky and Epshteyn, "Text Variants," pp. 147–48.

23. *Dos Sholem-Aleykhem-bukh*, p. 14. This segment was probably written prior to 1908.

24. Sholem Aleichem, *Misefer hayaldut*, chap. 2, *Hatsefirah* (1914), no. 38.

25. Miron, *Shalom Aleykhem: Pirkey-masa*, p. 173.

26. Compare Volf Rabinovitsh, *Mayn bruder Sholem Aleykhem* [My Brother SA] (Kiev, 1939), pp. 61–72; *Dos Sholem-Aleykhem-bukh*, pp. 20–21. Two of Aba's drawings are reproduced in *Dos Sholem-Aleykhem-bukh*, pp. 30–31. Sholem's retreat into nature and into the bosom of the Loyev family was not as total as it appears in the novel. In fact, thanks to the author's efforts, his brother Aba was installed as a tutor in a nearby village.

27. Miron, *Shalom Aleykhem: Pirkey-masa*, pp. 175–76.

28. In the early versions, for instance, Shmulik's disappearance is described in one paragraph (*Hatsefirah*, 1914, no. 29; Slutsky and Epshteyn, "The Second Variant," 363). In the final version, the sudden departure and resulting emotional crisis take up all of chapter seven. But the hero recovers as soon as a new friend enters the scene. Similarly, by comparing the original outline for chaps. 53–61 with their final form, we can see how SA fleshed out the scheme to introduce retardation episodes and heightened suspense. See *Dos Sholem-Aleykhem-bukh*, p. 13.